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SUBJECT: FIRST EVER USG VISIT TO INDIAN CAMPS FOR SRI LANKAN

REFUGEES

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11. (SBU) SUMMARY: On January 30, Consulate staff visited two camps for Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Vellore, Tamil Nadu, marking the first official visit to the camps by representatives of the U.S. government. The visit reflects the growing openness of Indian government authorities, particularly by Tamil Nadu state government officials, to allowing international assistance to improve the camps. The visit demonstrated the wide variance in the conditions in the camps: in Minnoor camp we saw hundreds of refugees living in makeshift conditions in a converted factory while in Chinnapallikuppam camp the refugees lived in conditions equal to their Indian neighbors. The recent PRM-funded grant to improve conditions for Sri Lankan refugees will no doubt help in camps like Minnoor. END SUMMARY.

GOVERNMENT LOOSENS GRIP ON CAMPS;
ALLOWS FIRST EVER VISIT BY USG OFFICIALS

12. (SBU) Refugees fleeing conflict in Sri Lanka began arriving in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu in 1983. Since then their numbers have waxed and waned along with the level of fighting on the island. Currently, there are over 73,000 refugees housed in 115 refugee camps spread throughout Tamil Nadu. With the exception of the arrival camp and two high-security camps for refugees suspected of involvement with the LTTE, refugees are free to come and go from the camps as they please. But, they are required to appear for regular roll call -- generally once a month -- in order to remain eligible for certain government benefits including subsidized rice and a modest monthly cash payment. Originally constructed to be temporary facilities, the majority of the camps are more than fifteen years old.

13. (SBU) Since the first arrivals of Sri Lankan refugees in Tamil Nadu in 1983, the government has limited access to the camps by foreigners and international organizations. International NGOs seeking to assist the refugees were not permitted to access the camps until recently. The Organization for Eelam Refugees Rehabilitation (OfERR), whose volunteers are all Sri Lankan refugees, was the only NGO the government allowed to work in the camps. UNHCR, which has not been permitted entry, has limited its work to facilitating and verifying the voluntariness of return of refugees to Sri Lanka. (NOTE: India is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol or its 1967 protocol. Further, the Government of India (GOI) has not established a system for providing protection to refugees or asylum seekers. The GOI considers Tibetans and Sri Lankans in settlements and refugee camps to be refugees, and provides assistance to them. All other populations must register with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which

operates under the auspices of UNDP, for protection and assistance. END NOTE.) Previous requests by the Consulate for permission to visit the camps were rejected until recently. Our state government interlocutors always blamed the central government for denying our requests based on the "sensitivity" of the refugee camps.

14. (SBU) Tamil Nadu state government officials, likely acting on their own, began to ease the restrictions over the past two years. First, they allowed foreign NGOs such as the Adventist Development and Relief Agency, Catholic Relief Services, and Jesuit Relief Services to work in the camps, so long as they did so in partnership with OfERR. Officials in the Tamil Nadu Rehabilitation Commission, the department charged with responsibility for the Sri Lankan refugees, later broached with Consulate staff the possibility of U.S. assistance for projects to improve conditions in the refugee camps. After a July 2007 meeting with a visiting officer from the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) and further consultations with Consulate staff, Jothi Jagarajan, Secretary - Public and Rehabilitation, Government of Tamil Nadu, informed us that his government would be amenable to U.S. grant funds for assistance with improving reception facilities, shelter, water, and sanitation in the camps. We believe that the state government officials made these overtures without first advising the central government.

15. (SBU) In December 2007, PRM selected a proposal submitted by the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to improve reception facilities, water, sanitation, and shelter in five refugee camps. Mindful that USG officials had not been permitted to visit the camps in the past we decided to test the waters for future monitoring visits to the PRM-funded project. We approached OfERR -- a subgrantee of the PRM-funded, CRS-implemented project -- because of OfERR's unparalleled access to the camps, which is grounded in its unique relationship of trust with the government of Tamil Nadu. OfERR secured a letter of permission from the Rehabilitation Commissioner, allowing us to visit two camps in northern Tamil Nadu's Vellore

district. The January 30 visit to the camp was the first ever visit by USG personnel to a camp for Sri Lankan refugees in India. We were greeted by officials from the local district government, as well an officer from the Tamil Nadu police's anti-terrorist "Q-branch."

MINNOOR CAMP

16. (SBU) OfERR selected two camps in Vellore district from opposite ends of the quality scale for our visit. We started with the worse off camp. Minnoor, a camp in name only, is a converted warehouse located just off the Bangalore-Chennai highway. Approximately sixty families (about 250 refugees total) are housed in the open floor space under the warehouse's roof. The government moved the sixty families to the warehouse after a 2005 fire destroyed their previous location, where the residents had individual homes. Minnoor residents expressed great dissatisfaction with their new location and repeatedly requested that we assist getting them individual housing units.

17. (SBU) The refugees have many complaints. Living on the warehouse floor, the residents have fashioned individual dwelling units by cordoning off spaces with plastic sheeting, cloth, and some corrugated tin. Each family has approximately 100 square feet but due to the haphazard nature of the cordons, there is substantial variation in the size of individual dwelling units. Gaps in the plastic sheeting and cloth, coupled with the close proximity (the dwelling units abut each other), result in limited privacy for the refugees. Privacy and sanitation concerns are heightened by the fact that there are no toilets or running water. Camp residents must use the limited open space adjacent to the warehouse, much of which runs along the busy highway, for toileting. This situation is especially difficult for the female camp residents. Moreover, the lack of proper kitchens leads to a fire hazard with residents cooking indoors over open kerosene and wood fires. One camp resident told us that the cloth and plastic partitions used to separate the units often catch fire.

18. (SBU) The news is not all bad. The camp has an onsite nursery school, with the government paying for healthy meals for the

children and the teacher's salary. OfERR supplements the government's contribution by paying the salaries of two teachers' assistants. The camp has regular electricity and there is a shared public pay phone which is operated as a micro-enterprise by one of the camp's residents. Camp residents told us that jobs are available at local brick kilns. The jobs involve manual labor and pay about four dollars a day. The residents told us they earn a little less than the local Indian employees who work in the kilns.

CHINNAPALLIKUPPAM CAMP

¶9. (SBU) OfERR explained to us that the second camp we visited -- Chinnapallikuppam -- is one of the better off Sri Lankan refugee camps in Tamil Nadu. The camp is a small village located in the countryside approximately one kilometer from the main highway. Families have individual homes, most of which are solid construction with thatched roofs. The camp is basically indistinguishable from the neighboring villages, with the majority of the Sri Lankans' houses equal to or only slightly more modest than their Indian neighbors. Camp residents told us that they had amicable relations with the neighboring villagers. When we asked about the availability of employment the residents told us that there are plenty of jobs for anyone who wants them, ranging from day labor to work in nearby shoe factories.

¶10. (SBU) Chinnapallikuppam camp feels more like a reasonably prosperous Indian village than a refugee camp. All of the houses have government-provided electricity, although the residents complained of frequent power outages (an increasing problem throughout Tamil Nadu). All but one of the houses we looked into had television sets; many had direct-to-home satellite dishes. Unlike in Minnoor camp, many of Chinnapallikuppam's residents have bicycles, mopeds, and in some cases motorcycles. One resident proudly called us into his house to see his sewing machine, which he used for his tailoring business. The camp also included a variety of community resources that would likely not be available in a typical Indian village -- including a volleyball court, a well-stocked rural first aid center, and a spirulina cultivation pond to provide nutritional supplements for nursing mothers -- that OfERR sponsored for the refugees' benefit. Like Minnoor, Chinnapallikuppam camp has a government nursery school supplemented with assistance from OfERR.

¶11. (SBU) The camp residents were not without complaints. They took us around the camp pointing out gaps in the tar paper roofs and walls of some of the older houses. (NOTE: The older tar paper houses are the distinct minority. The majority of the houses are mud brick construction. END NOTE.) They also took us to the village's small electrical switching station, which is housed in a small thatched roof hut. The station is a safety hazard, they said, pointing out exposed power switches and manifestly unsafe wiring. The villagers explained that there is a severe shortage of water in the area due to the presence of many tanneries in the region. They acknowledged that the problem was not limited to their camp, but rather all of the villages in the area suffered. When we asked about toilets, they showed us a block of toilets built by OfERR but explained that they cannot use them for lack of water. Gesturing at the abundance of empty land that surrounded the camp, one refugee said the lack of toilets was not a major hindrance. Purchased drinking water is brought in via tank trucks, stored in plastic cans and sold for a small price by a locally run micro-enterprise.

MIXED VIEWS ON RETURNING TO SRI LANKA

¶12. (SBU) The majority of the refugees in both Minnoor and Chinnapallikuppam camps have lived continuously in India since the mid-1990s, with many of the children never having been to Sri Lanka. In both camps we asked the refugees whether they would like to return to Sri Lanka or remain in India. Their responses were mixed, but in both camps the refugees began by saying they certainly would not return right now. They said they would not entertain the idea unless there is peace in Sri Lanka and it was evident that none of them expected peace anytime soon. One refugee in Minnoor reminded us that previous periods of peace had only ended with further

bloodshed, including the recent termination of the 2002 Ceasefire Agreement. Based on a show of hands, the refugees we met in Minnoor and Chinnapallikuppam camps were evenly split on whether they would return in the hypothetical scenario that a lasting peace took hold in Sri Lanka. Those that said they would return said they had left much behind and emphasized their connections to the island. Those who prefer staying in India are pessimistic about the prospects for peace in Sri Lanka, adding that they have lived in India for much of their lives and that their children knew only India.

¶13. (SBU) COMMENT: The refugees' lukewarm response to the prospect of returning to the island primarily reflects the viciousness of the ongoing conflict in Sri Lanka. Given the continued bloodshed the very idea of returning seems a pipe dream to them. But it is also stems from the Indian government's relatively warm treatment of the refugees. India is still a poor country but the government has ensured that Sri Lankan refugees have equal (or sometimes greater) access to basic material necessities as the average Indian. The housing we saw was equal or better than that of many Indians; the government provides subsidized rice to the refugees at a cheaper price than it gives to Indian citizens. Tamil Nadu even gives a modest monthly payment (known as the "dole") to each Sri Lankan refugee family, another benefit poor Indians do not get.

¶14. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: Despite the fact that India does a commendable job of providing for the refugees' material needs, the PRM grant is worthwhile in addressing humanitarian gaps. The commitment of USG funds conveys our appreciation for India's efforts on behalf of the refugees and exemplifies the increasing partnership between the United States and India. Our interlocutors have, in return, expressed their appreciation for the PRM grant and say they would welcome future grants. But more important than the message it sends to the Indians is that the grant will improve the lives of thousands of refugees by fixing the types of serious water and sanitation deficiencies we saw first hand at Minnoor camp. END COMMENT.

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